

Moving towards political participation: the moderation of Moroccan Salafis since the beginning of the Arab Spring

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Moving towards Political Participation

The Moderation of Moroccan Salafis since the Beginning of the Arab Spring

Mohammed Masbah

Salafis, including former “Salafi-Jihadis”, have become a presence in the public sphere through their participation in the protests – side-by-side with secular forces – of the so-called 20 February Movement. There are also numerous indications that Salafis will play a role in shaping Morocco’s future political landscape, albeit while proposing less radical objectives than what they used to profess. The trend is leading towards greater acceptance of political plurality, more cooperation with moderate Islamists, and less aggressive attitudes towards seculars and Western governments. Most importantly, they are explicitly renouncing violent means in the domestic power struggle. Moroccan Salafis have begun aiming at assuming a political role, attempting to influence policy-making, and are increasingly prepared to play by the rules of the democratic game – thus following the example set by their peers in other Arab countries such as Egypt.

Moroccan Salafis gained increased visibility in the public sphere through the wave of protests launched by the 20 February Movement in all major Moroccan cities in early 2011, inspired by the upheavals that swept the Arab world. Unlike their peers in Egypt, who initially condemned the upheavals as *khuruj* (i.e. a rebellion against the ruler rejected in Islam), the Moroccan Salafis not only blessed the Arab revolutions, but also actively participated in the 20 February Movement. This created a political opportunity to achieve the release of Salafis from prison, and ask for rehabilitation and compensation for what they held to be arbitrary persecution by the authorities. For Moroccan Salafis, the 20 February Movement served as an excellent stage to return back

to the public scene, from which they had been effectively banned after the 16 May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca. Although most of them never engaged in actual violence – and no direct links to the attacks were ever established – at the time, many prominent Salafis had been tried and incarcerated for having the alleged moral responsibility of being ideological instigators of desperate youths and for “praising terrorism”.

The authorities’ response to the 20 February Movement was quick, and it efficiently managed to dissipate some of the resentment of this particular group of protesters. Less than two months after the unrest began, King Mohammed VI issued a royal pardon to 190 political prisoners, among

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them the well-known Salafi leader Mohammed Fizazi, as well as tens of other Salafis, most of whom had already served the larger parts of their sentences. The authorities also allowed the prominent Salafi scholar Mohammed Maghraoui back from his exile in Saudi Arabia, where he had fled to in September 2008 after issuing a notorious *fatwa* (i.e. Islamic legal opinions) allowing for the marriage of underage girls, which was considered to contradict the new Moroccan family law (*Moudawana*) introduced by the King in 2003.

Changes in attitudes and behaviour

Since their release from prison in April 2011, prominent Salafi leaders have surprised observers with a change in ideas and behaviour. This followed as a result of the 20 February Movement protests as well as a demand for pardon in February 2012 by Mustafa Ramid, the PJD minister of justice and freedoms. Prominent Salafi leaders have publicly declared to accept democracy as well as the monarchy, instead of asking for the restoration of the Caliphate. They have also softened some positions relating to the participation of women in public life, voiced sympathy and support for the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), indicated a willingness to create political parties and/or religion-based NGOs, endorsed the 2011 constitution, and called upon people to vote in the constitutional referendum. Last but not least, they have participated in debates with seculars in the public sphere (such as in university campuses, the media, etc.).

These declarations mark a profound change from the positions they held before the Arab Spring, when Salafis were not directly involved in politics, which were considered un-Islamic and incompatible with Sharia law. Also, democracy was considered an innovation without any precedents or roots in the period of the prophet and his companions. Indeed, one decade ago, some Salafis had called democracy a “new idol worshipped instead of God”.

Still, while the majority of those called Salafi-jihadis had supported some ideas of al-Qaida – a sentiment shared by a considerable part of the Moroccan population – they had never resorted to violence themselves.

Who are they?

And what do they want?

Such attitudes to politics are rooted in deep ideological and religious convictions. Salafis are usually described as those Sunni Muslims who propagate to follow, literally, the fundamental Islamic sources: the Quran and the Sunna (i.e. prophetic tradition) as well as the model of *al-Salaf al-Salih*, that is, the pious forefathers who lived during the first three generations after the prophet. However, this definition is not precise because these ideas are shared by most other Islamist groups, and even by a great majority of Muslims. What sets the Salafis apart is their rigidity concerning ideology and social behaviour. They hold that religious texts have only one single meaning, which is clear in itself, and that only religious (Salafi) scholars can interpret God’s word, that is, that all other interpretations are false, or at least inaccurate. In other words, they monopolize the absolute truth.

They also believe that strictly and literally following God’s words is a precondition for eventually entering paradise. They therefore stick to the strict adherence to details and forms in both rites and everyday activities. Hence, the long untrimmed beards, the wearing of the *niqab* (facial veil) for women and other traditional garments, etc. The focus is on the propagation of the correct *individual* religiosity – that is, upholding *’aqida* (correct Islamic doctrine) and fighting *bid’a* (illegitimate innovation in religion) – through individual and collective preaching in mosques and at religious and social events, as well as through new media, such as CDs, Facebook, websites, etc.

For Salafis, public affairs have not been a priority. Since truth is one and revealed, there is no need for a public sphere in order to deliberate. Differences of opinion

amount to apostasy, which is supposed to be fought against, not discussed about. All human innovations that do not have a precedent in the historical Islamic experience are prohibited. Institutions and concepts – such as the nation-state, parliament, or the separation of powers – are seen as innovations without precedent in Islamic traditions. As a result of this reasoning, Salafis have traditionally refused to participate in modern political institutions. These have been considered apostasy by the *takfiri* strand of the Salafis (i.e. those who declare other Muslims, for one reason or the other, to be infidels who should repent or be punished) and considered by the “quietist” strand of the Salafis to be a matter that just does not concern them.

In social reality, Salafis in Morocco (as everywhere) are not unified and often disagree about social priorities and agendas. In Morocco, to date, Salafis are not strongly organized, either at the local or national levels. There are exceptions, such as some Quranic schools that are fully legalized and organized, and there have been some attempts to create informal networks that could pave the way for a future coalition among some former Salafi-jihadi prisoners. However, the mainstream trend within the Moroccan Salafiyya is still without a clearly defined structure, does not have a united leadership, and professes divergent priorities. As a result, they have limited capacity in influencing political developments, though some of them are aware of their potential to influence politics: “If Salafis were organized in a political party, they would be a force to reckon with,” as a famous Salafi sheikh mentioned in November 2012.

Within this rather amorphous and fluid movement of Salafis in Morocco, four types, or currents, can be distinguished, based on two criteria: 1) ideology: rigidity vs. pragmatism, and 2) political attitudes: politicized vs. non-political.

(1) The quietists, sometimes also described as “traditionalists” or as “scientific Salafiyya”: These are mainly religious

scholars and ideologues and their adepts, whose main focus is to teach and study religious knowledge in mosques, Quranic schools, and religion-based NGOs. One good example for this is the NGO the Moroccan Association to Call for the Quran and the Sunna, which is run by Sheikh Mohammed Maghraoui.

(2) Politicians and pragmatics: This is a new trend initiated by some former Salafi-jihadis. The main figure is Sheikh Mohamed Fizazi, who is working to create a political party, or at least a religion-orientated NGO. One example of such an NGO would be *al-Tawhid wal-Islah* (Unity and Reform Movement), which is a legalized NGO with a Muslim Brotherhood orientation and has a strategic alliance with the moderate Islamist party PJD. However, to date, Fizazi has not succeeded yet to convince the main Salafi leaders to engage with him in establishing a political party.

(3) The *Haraki* (Arabic for “Movement”) civil society activists: Formed mainly by former prisoners, these groups try to establish structures of social support. For example, recently, the well-known sheikhs Mohammed Rafiki Abou Hafs and Hassan Kettani established an NGO called *Dar al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom), which is supporting young people to get married, organizing training sessions in skills development, and producing research.

(4) The so-called Jihadi prisoners and their support groups: These are organized in informal networks comprised of former Salafi-jihadi prisoners and their families. Most of them are ideologically rigid. Thus, while there have been several attempts to mediate their release under the condition of them renouncing violence and recognizing monarchy, they have failed to comply with these demands. The Joint Committee for the Defense of Islamist Detainees is one of the most active groups, with their priority now being the struggle for releasing hundreds of imprisoned Salafis.

Early signs of moderation

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, there has been an increasing tendency among Moroccan Salafis to participate in the public sphere and the political process. There are clear signs that such political involvement goes hand-in-hand with a notable shift towards moderation regarding attitudes and behaviour. Moderation in this regard should be understood as, first, renouncing the use of violence to achieve one's goals. This occurs at the level of attitudes by not engaging in *takfirism* (i.e. considering other Muslims as infidels, which serves as the ideological justification to use violence against them). It also occurs at the level of behaviour by not using violence against the "near enemy", that is, Muslim states, societies, and civilians, as well as against non-Muslim states, as long as they are not occupying Muslim territory. Second, moderation should be understood as accepting pluralism, the rule of law, and playing according to the rules of the game, that is, not working as a secretive organization.

Indeed, Moroccan Salafis are becoming increasingly more moderate in this sense. Even ultra-conservative types have started to revise their positions and behaviour, with the exception of some marginal elements, who still maintain puritan and strict attitudes towards the state and society, thereby increasingly alienating themselves from the public.

In fact, the first signs of a tendency towards moderation were apparent even before the onset of the Arab Spring. For example, in March 2007, Sheikh Abou Hafs wrote a paper in prison titled *Anssifouna* (Do Justice to Us), in which he explained his political views. In the paper he condemned the violent attacks in Morocco and all Muslim countries and distanced himself from the practice of *takfir*. He also endorsed the monarchy.

Another perhaps less obvious – but nevertheless significant – sign of moderation were the hunger strikes of Salafi prisoners after their imprisonment in the wake

of the 2003 attacks. In fact, hunger strikes are strictly forbidden (*haram*) in Islamic doctrine, as are all actions liable to cause harm to one's own body, and therefore they are strongly condemned by conservative Muslims. By ignoring such prohibitions and adopting hunger strikes as a pragmatic tool to make their voices heard and to create general sympathy and awareness for their situation, Salafis demonstrated two essential aspects of moderation: readiness to compromise on and suspend ideological prescriptions for the sake of political objectives; and a keen interest to engage with the public sphere in order to win as allies parts of society that do not share their ideology. They also called on journalists (sometimes even women) to provide them with information. These protests and hunger strikes increased even more after the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010 in Tunisia.

Factors conducive to moderation

The shift towards moderation by the Moroccan Salafis is a multi-faceted and complex process. Factors contributing to the unique situation in Morocco (in comparison with other North African countries) and towards the decrease in confrontational relations between state actors and the Salafis are: (1) the continuity of the regime and its religious legitimacy; (2) the monarchy's strategy in dealing with the Salafis; (3) the electoral success of Islamists in general, and more particularly of the PJD; and (4) the effects of the Arab Spring.

The first and most important factor in the unique situation in Morocco that has shown to be conducive to the moderation of Moroccan Salafis is the continuity of the regime and its role in the religious sphere. The latter has clearly limited the Salafis' room for manoeuvre as well as their aspirations, with regard to the assumption of political power. The monarchy plays a significant role, as it claims a monopoly on religious and political legitimacy, and it has the power to impose its own rules on

all other actors. In contrast to other North African countries (such as Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt), the regime has not changed in the context of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the monarchy in Morocco has persisted for more than twelve centuries and still enjoys an extraordinary degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Even if the 2011 constitution limits some of the monarch's powers *de jure*, he still remains very powerful, in particular in the realm of religion. According to the constitution, the king is the only person who combines religious and political authority, as head of state and Commander of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). He chairs the Higher Council of Ulemas (i.e. religious scholars) and appoints its members. The council, in turn, has the monopoly on issuing *fatwas*. Everyday questions of ordinary Muslims are answered via their local councils, which are also appointed by the king. The king also appoints the Minister of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, who is accountable directly to him and not to the head of government. And he has the exclusive power to legislate in religious affairs by royal decree, according to article 41 of the new constitution.

Indeed, already after the 2003 Casablanca attacks, the Moroccan government launched a vast project of restructuring the religious sphere, with the declared objective of protecting the "spiritual security" of its citizens, that is, fighting off the ideas of al-Qaida, and preventing such ideas from gaining traction with the faithful. As a consequence, the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs today controls the religious discourse in the mosques by unifying the content of Friday sermons (*khutba*) and "containing radical discourse in the mosque". It also appoints almost all the religious personnel in 50,000 mosques in Morocco as well as in the Quranic schools.

The second factor that has led to more moderation has been the Moroccan monarchy's stick-and-carrot strategy towards Salafi actors after 2003. On the one hand,

radical elements were relentlessly repressed, a large number of Salafis were arrested – often arbitrarily and on questionable legal grounds – and dozens of clandestine mosques and some Quranic schools were closed. On the other hand, activities of "quietists" were tolerated. Thus, among thousands of Salafis prosecuted since 2003, only very few have been adepts of Mohammed Maghraoui.

The third factor is related to the Salafis' fascination with the increasingly greater role played by mainstream Islamists in the region, above all the PJD's role in Morocco. As a legal political party with tens of associated NGOs, the PJD has gained legitimacy via participating in elections and has been successfully leading a government since December 2011. Their example made the Salafis take note that political participation can yield concrete outcomes by influencing policy-making and by protecting the social movement from harassment by the authorities. After the 2003 attacks, some political leaders had made calls to dissolve the PJD, accusing it of possessing the "moral responsibility" for promoting terrorism. Indeed, back then, several prominent Salafi leaders explicitly supported the PJD's positions and expressed admiration for its organization and leaders. That admiration was translated into calls by several sheikhs to vote for the PJD in the November 2011 elections. It is difficult though to prove concretely their electoral influence, as they had been boycotting elections for a long period, and therefore most of their followers were not listed on the voter registers.

Some PJD leaders explained this support as being the returning of favours for the PJD's defence of the right of Salafis to exist, its criticism of the authorities' harassment and repression against Salafi Quranic schools in 2008, and the support given to Salafi detainees by Mountada Karama, which is a human rights NGO close to the PJD. However, Salafi support has not always been a blank cheque. There has been criticism and disagreement, both ideologically and with regard to political choices. Some

Salafis have been dissatisfied with the PJD's incapacity to implement Islamic principles and rules as a governing party. This is due to, among other factors, the complexity of the Moroccan political system, which forces actors to work in government coalitions rather than through one-party rule. This has been seen as "weakening the Islamist project". Some Salafis even organized a sit-in in front of the PJD party headquarters in Rabat in February 2012. Salafis also strongly criticized the statements of the PJD Minister of Justice, Mustafa Ramid, concerning the absence of political detainees in Morocco, or statements by a well-known lawyer and current PJD Parliamentarian, in which he denied the existence of systematic torture in Moroccan prisons.

The fourth factor leading to Salafi moderation was the overthrow of Tunisia's and Egypt's dictators. This was done in a largely peaceful manner, with broad participation by all segments of society and accompanied by practiced tolerance and solidarity between Islamists and secularists, Muslims and Christians during the Tahrir Square protests in Cairo. These developments had a significant bearing on the Salafis' worldview. Actually, in the beginning, major Salafi scholars from several countries, such as Saudi Arabia, had clearly stated that the protests were considered a rebellion against the ruler and thus completely forbidden according to Islam. In turn, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a prominent Sunni scholar linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, openly criticized Salafis for discrediting Arab revolutions.

However, Moroccan Salafis (as well as many others) were stunned by the peaceful character of the mass movements. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Arab societies, a peaceful mass protest against oppressive rulers took place, involving "normal" citizens of all segments of society. This created an "abnormality" in the conceptual framework of the Salafis, in which order is valued over everything else, as expressed in the statement "Obey the (ruler)

even if he steals your money and skin of your back." Even the use of the term "revolution" with regards to these developments was a new addition to the political terminology of Salafis. As described above, traditional Islamic political thought would use the term *khuruj*, that is, rebellion against the ruler, for such a situation, implying that a minority take up arms to seize power. This was seen as fundamentally illegitimate, as it threatened to create *fitna* (i.e. discord), and hence threatened the very existence of the Islamic community and order. The largely peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt took Salafis to a different and unfamiliar political and intellectual space, which they are now trying to adapt to at the ideological and behavioural levels.

To date, it is still unclear what effect the much less peaceful revolutions in Libya and Syria have had on the Salafis' thinking. It is also unclear if accepting to play according to the rules of the game equals embracing not only the procedures but also the content of democracy. While the Arab Spring has pushed Moroccan Salafis towards participation in the public sphere as well as accepting plurality, the rule of law, and political freedoms, this should not be considered a linear and irreversible process. They will definitely need time to adapt to the new realities. Whether this adaptation will result in further moderation or re-radicalization depends crucially on their being accepted by the monarchy and other forces as legitimate societal and political players.

The future of Salafis' political participation

In contrast to developments in other parts of North Africa, Moroccan Salafis up to now have neither constituted political parties and run in elections, as in Egypt, nor have they radicalized, as in Libya and Tunisia, where Salafis have been blamed for violence, for example against US embassies, and for the destruction of Sufi shrines. Well-known Moroccan Salafi leaders have

even called upon their peers in Tunisia to support the revolution, reject violence, and work within the political system and the framework of the state. In other words, Moroccan Salafis actually stand between the two larger regional Salafi tendencies: They have not established political parties or been fully recognized as political actors; nor do they work illegally or use violence.

Until now, only one prominent Salafi leader, Mohammed Fizazi, has announced that he is willing to create a political party, and he will have to convince other sheikhs to participate. Other former Salafi-Jihadis are striving to create religion-based NGOs, while others again prefer to stay out of politics.

At this point in time, it is unclear whether Salafis will succeed in organizing into modern structures and in adapting their ideologies to more practical politics and public affairs. One of the challenges linked to that will be to distinguish between a focus on *da'awa* (religious predication) and politics, with the first requiring normative discourses and the second demanding more pragmatic attitudes and behaviour and a translation of principles into practical policies.

The Arab Spring created an important political opportunity for Salafis to become more moderate. If they want to have an influence in the public sphere, however, they will have to consolidate their presence by establishing legalized NGOs, participating in public debates, and producing a political language understood by all segments of society rather than only religious (or Salafi) people. They will also have to work against foreign influences and distinguish their beliefs from both Saudi Wahhabism and al-Qaida ideology, while drawing a firm line against the use of violence.

It is difficult to predict whether Moroccan authorities would allow a Salafi political party to be legalized or not, due to security and political concerns. One example of the kind of repressive stance that the regime might take against Salafis in the

future is the drastic repression of protests by the police after the 28 April 2011 terrorist attack in Marrakech, as well as the repression by police after attempts by the 20 February Movement to protest in front of the alleged secret prison of Temara, in which several human rights NGOs had already reported torture and human rights abuses in the period after the 2003 terrorist attacks.

Also, the palace is already struggling to manage its relations with the moderate Islamist party PJD, which accepted to play according to the rules of the game and succeeded in winning a plurality in the November 2011 elections. Obligated by the new constitution, the king had to choose the head of government from the party that received the most seats in elections. Thus, for the first time, the PJD formed the government.

Still, there are two divide-and-rule strategies that might lead Moroccan authorities to allow for the establishment of a Salafi political party: (1) if they feel that it can weaken the PJD by splitting their electoral base, especially among urban, educated, pious citizens; (2) if the Salafis were to integrate into an already established, yet weak political party trusted by the authorities, such as the moderate Islamist Party of Renaissance and Virtue, a split-off from the PJD that formed an alliance in the 2011 elections with the Party of Authenticity and Modernity created by an advisor to the king.

In the near future, the most likely scenario is that the authorities will legalize one or several Salafi NGOs and watch their attitudes and behaviour before legalizing Salafi political parties. However, even if Salafis agree to establish a political party, and authorities allow them to enter directly into politics, in the short to mid-term, they will most probably not see a rise in popularity similar to that of Egypt's Salafi Nour Party, namely because they face several obstacles. First and foremost, they do not have as many resources as their Egyptian peers; in particular, they do not possess

media and satellite channels or have a network of strong grassroots NGOs. Nor do they receive strong financial support from Saudi Arabia.

Recommendations

Europe has little leverage over Salafis, but it can exert quite some influence on the Moroccan monarchy. It would be important to encourage the Moroccan authorities to include moderate Salafi elements – including former Salafi-Jihadis – in the political process and the public sphere by allowing the establishment of Salafi political parties and NGOs, as well as the inclusion of moderate Salafi elements into official religious bodies. Also, the monarchy should be discouraged from again repressing political activities of non-violent Salafis so as to prevent renewed radicalization. One important element in such a policy would be for the authorities to recognize past human rights abuses and to establish a new Equity and Reconciliation Commission to correct the errors committed after the 2003 attacks.

For Europeans, it is important to understand that the Salafi spectrum is very heterogeneous. Europeans should engage in dialogue with its moderate members on issues related to political and societal freedoms and the rule of law. The United States has already started to engage in such a dialogue with the most moderate members of the Salafi spectrum, represented by leaders such as Mohammed Fizazi.

Europeans should also be aware that they are perceived by Salafis (as well as by other actors in the region) as having supported dictators in the region and their repression of a peaceful Salafiyya, not least in the context of the global war on terror. Such perceptions will only be changed through persistent engagement with all non-violent forces in the region, whether Europeans agree with their policies and values or not.

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